

Oprah Gail Winfrey

Oprah was born on January 29, 1954, in rural Mississippi to 18-year-old Vernita Lee. She was raised by her grandmother, Hattie Mae Lee, who taught her to read at church. During her childhood, Oprah experienced sexual abuse from her cousins and uncles and credits her father with saving her life; he was strict, set rules in place, required weekly book reports, and made her learn five new vocabulary words every day. As a teenager, Oprah attended Tennessee State on a full scholarship and became Miss Fire Prevention, Miss Black Nashville, and Miss Tennessee.



At just 19 years old, Oprah became the first Black female co-anchor on the Nashville evening news. At the age of 22, Winfrey moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where she hosted the TV chat show "People Are Talking." She then took over the AM Chicago talk show and expanded the topics to include current and controversial issues, gaining as much fame as Phil Donohue's competing program. She renamed it "The Oprah Winfrey Show."



Oprah is a recipient of the Cecil B DeMille Award, awarded by the Golden Globes, to individuals with outstanding contributions to the world of entertainment. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013 for her efforts in supporting young women and combatting childhood poverty. She has donated over 300 million dollars of personal wealth to charities like Free the Children and UNICEF and is considered one of the most generous philanthropists of the 21st century.



In 1994, Oprah was a major force behind the National Child Protection Act, establishing a list of child abusers to help employers screen out dangerous individuals and she has been named one of TIME's Top 100 Most Influential People 10 times since 2004. Oprah's influence on Black culture is undeniable; she is a strong, intelligent, and a powerful representation of Black joy on the big screen. The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa serves as a liberatory outlet for the young students that she calls her "daughters"; in the first graduating class of 72 children, every student received a full scholarship to college. Oprah's impact is beyond measure; she has extended positive change in almost every avenue of life and is truly a force of growth and change.